

**Teaching Culturally and Linguistically Diverse International Students in Open and Online Learning Environments: A Research Symposium**

**Literacy Gatekeepers in the Ontario Education System. Why ESL Students Fail: A Bordieuan Perspective**

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**Abstract**

*Ontario's education system aims to improve children's literacy levels who hail from diverse backgrounds. Schools must tailor their program layout to their students' unique needs. Immersion is one of them. As with submersion, instruction occurs in the second language (L2), but there are significant differences. ESL students experience linguistic barriers. According to Migration Matters (June 2017), by 2022, 78% of job openings will require some post-secondary training or university degree. Many immigrants do not have the skills necessary to succeed, and these percentages have not improved. There is a widening incongruence between the complexity of the needs of ESL learners and the availability of ESL [English as a Second Language] services in Canadian schools. School boards across Canada have steadily reduced ESL services over the years (Nichols et al., 2020). Schools are not meeting the language needs of immigrant youth in Ontario, where 29.1% of the population, the highest of any province, is foreign-born (Government of Ontario, 2017). In 2017, 63% of Ontario's elementary schools and 58% of secondary schools had English language learners (ELLs). However, only 38% of English-language elementary schools had ESL teachers (People for Education, 2017). 20% of elementary schools and 31% of secondary schools have no formal process for identifying ELL students (People for Education, 2015), which is the first step to placing students in ELL services. Students' diverse needs must be met for them to acquire necessary literacy skills. Literacy is a civil right—no one should leave the school system as an illiterate person.*

Keywords: Literacy, ESL, Social Justice, Pedagogy, Evidence-Based Literacy

## **Introduction**

Ontario's education system aims to improve the literacy of children who hail from diverse backgrounds. It has been well-established in social science research that family background (Coleman, 1966; Jencks, 1972), namely social-economic status (Duncan, 1982) affects student's academic outcomes.

Social class acts as a *gatekeeper* to restrict who goes on to academic success.

In what follows, the way language intersects with the social class to act as a barrier to student's academic success will be explored, using Bourdieu's notion of habitus, which "is the set of dispositions, beliefs, and values that inform a student's participation in education" (Bourdieu & Johnson, 2016, p.133).

In a theoretical framework, Bourdieu provided a notion of understanding about how the education system reproduces social class. A concept of capital is embodied in people's practices, objectified through books and institutions. The field was represented by the social relations between people who perform the role of actors. I shall explain how academics act as a gatekeeper and thus limit ESL students from school success.

## **Literature Review**

In "On Critical Pedagogy," Henry Giroux (2020) refers to all literacy practices as "critical literacy practices," stating, "Literacy is a discursive practice in which difference becomes critical to understanding, not only how to read, write, or develop oral skills. . . . It also recognizes that the identities of 'others' matter, as part of a progressive set of politics and practices aimed at the reconfiguration of society."

Students, upon entering the school system, are classified into six categories based on their proficiency with their native language: pre-literate (the learner's native language lacks a written system), literacy is lacking (the learner cannot read the native language), semiliterate (the learner possesses only rudimentary reading abilities), literate in a language other than the English alphabet (the learner can read a non-alphabetic language), literate in a language with a script other than the Roman alphabet (the learner can read a language that has a non-Roman alphabet writing system), and literate in the Roman alphabet. It is generally assumed that ESL students understand the alphabet, therefore this paper shall refer to alphabet-literate individuals. The illiteracy situation is not unique in Ontario, as school boards report increased numbers of second language students and no resources to support those students (Mueller et al., 2004; Wright, 2005).

The number of children in the nation's public schools between the ages of 15 and 16 has grown twice, from 3.8 million in 1979, to 9.9 million by 2004 (Bustrum, 2010); there are a plethora of students who need appropriate English-language instruction, in order for them to be successful.

ESL students who have migrated to Canada recently, or whose parents cannot speak English, experience many challenges in becoming English literate. Moreover, apart from developing literacy in their second language, they must maneuver through Canadian society's socio-cultural factors.

### **Theoretical Model**

Bourdieu's view of language as a form of capital, and the supplementation concept of linguistic field(s), corresponded with the analysis of primary school teachers dealing with children who are non-English speakers for several reasons, such as the inherent power of the English language, or the specific nature of the policy and curriculum for English teaching in Canada. Thus, Bourdieu's view of language corresponded with the analysis of primary school teachers dealing with children who are non-English speakers.

### **Specifics of the Issue**

ESL students are significantly disadvantaged. By the end of elementary school, approximately 30%-40% of ESL students in primary schools lack access to grade-appropriate reading levels in English. Students who did not achieve these skills by the time they have graduated from high school struggle to improve their ability to read in English. Therefore, a multicultural investigation of the language and power dynamic should help teachers foster language and cultural capability in their ESL students. Teacher colleges are inconsistent in their preparation of reading specialists working with ESL learners (Samson et al., 2008). Presently, there is no structured ESL curriculum in the Ontario framework system, and the literacy curriculum is not backed up with scientific research (IDA, 2018). Cummins (1984) and Collier (1989) proved that immigrant students need an average of five to seven years to acquire what Cummins called "Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency" to compete with their native-speaking peers.

### **Key Players and Stakeholders**

Ontario's stakeholders are the school administrators whose role is to implement the curriculum; therefore, the change must start there. The key players though, are the college teachers and the researchers who prove that the literacy practice, regardless of the student's habitus and citizenship, must be aligned with science, and not with a program that has no professional value (Burns et al., 2014; Parker et al., 2014).

The United States, for instance, has seen significant progress in 4th-grade reading: they have not only passed a comprehensive K-3 reading policy grounded in the scientific evidence base, but also have policymakers who are deliberately funding the implementation efforts. Appropriations for literacy policies in Mississippi and, most recently, Alabama now support state-wide literacy efforts. When one invests in preventing or remediating reading difficulties early, it sends a strong message to educators, parents, and students that there is a commitment to ensuring that funding is not a barrier to student success (The Reading League, 2020).

Policymakers need to know the educational landscape of their province. Whereas some school districts have adequate resources to provide optimal and varied learning experiences for their ESL students, other districts do not. In addition to indicating the effectiveness of instruction, end-of-year assessment scores should also expose inequities, such as access to materials, technology, and other resources. Equity should be ensured across boards and, more specifically, demographics. Early supports should be provided for all students, while teachers should be trained to deliver this instruction through professional development grounded in the science of reading and teaching English as a second language.

### **Evaluation of Alternatives**

Numerous alternatives may be incorporated to ensure the success of ESL. While bilingual education is the most frequently used term to refer to programs that incorporate instruction in both a native language and the dominant language of English, some studies indicate that it is not as effective as other methods, and vice versa. As a result, schools must tailor their program layout to their students' unique needs. Immersion is one of them. As with submersion, instruction occurs in the second language (L2), but there are significant differences. The immersion teacher understands L1, and students may address the teacher in that language; however, the immersion teacher typically responds in L2.

Additionally, the curriculum is structured so that no prior knowledge of L2 is assumed as the material is taught. Students are understandably introduced to content. That is unlikely to happen in Canadian ESL classes. Thus, the curriculum should focus on structured literacy and teaching English as a second language, including a systematic knowledge of linguistics, at all levels, and the teacher's professional education and development. Teaching bilingual and multilingual students presents unique challenges; consequently, prospective teachers should receive training on teaching ESL children effectively. Another critical issue is proper teacher instruction and training in the area of language: "Teachers reported being unsure of how to address English language learners" (Gandara et.al, 2006).

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

Literacy is a civil right, thus, there is a Right-to-Read Inquiry in Ontario (2019). ESL students experience linguistic barriers. Arriving from other countries, and with different linguistic backgrounds, using a language that, quite often, does not have similar rules to English, they must receive proper instruction. According to Migration Matters (June 2017), by 2022, 78% of job openings will require post-secondary training or university degrees. Many immigrants do not have the skills necessary to succeed, and these percentages have not improved.

There is a widening incongruence between the complexity of the needs of ESL learners and the availability of ESL [English as a Second Language] services in Canadian schools. School boards across Canada have steadily reduced ESL services over the years (Nicols et al., 2020). Schools are not meeting the language needs of immigrant youth in Ontario, where 29.1% of the population, the highest of any province, is foreign-born (Government of Ontario, 2017). In 2017, 63% of Ontario's elementary schools and 58% of secondary schools had English language learners

(ELLs), but only 38% of English-language elementary schools had ESL teachers (People for Education, 2017). Moreover, 20% of elementary schools and 31% of secondary schools have no formal process for identifying ELL students (People for Education, 2015), which is the first step to placing students in ELL services.

There is a need for additional funding in the school setting. Teachers should receive evidence-based literacy and ESL training to meet the diverse needs of their students. Otherwise, the literacy rates among ESL students will decline, which, in the long run, will take a toll on the Canadian economy, because today's ESL student struggling with literacy is tomorrow's illiterate adult.

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